



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Equatorial Guinea

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. Because of perceived government sensitivity and possible repercussions, religious groups practice self-censorship regarding criticism of the Government.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 10,827 square miles, and the Government estimates the population is approximately 1 million (other sources estimate the population to be approximately 586,000.) Christians account for approximately 93 percent of the population, and 5 percent of the population practices traditional indigenous religions. In addition, Muslims, members of the Baha'i Faith, practitioners of other religions, and those who are atheist each comprise less than 1 percent of the population. Roman Catholicism is the principal religion, dating to the Spanish colonial period, when almost the entire population was baptized into the faith. Catholics comprise approximately 87 percent of the population, and an estimated 4.5 percent belongs to Protestant denominations. Many Catholics reportedly also follow traditional beliefs. Christian worship is concentrated in the more urbanized areas. Although in the past there was no known organized Christian worship in remote rural areas, both Catholic and Protestant church leaders report expansion into interior regions.

Foreign missionary groups operate, both on Bioko Island and the mainland. These include Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Assemblies of God, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Nondenominational evangelical Christian groups are also present, including those who translate the Bible into indigenous languages.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. However, the Government remains sensitive to any criticism, and church leaders usually avoid discussions that could be construed as critical of the Government or government officials.

The Government generally allows preaching, religious teaching, education, and practice by believers. The Government requires permission for any activities outside the confines of places of worship; however, in practice, this requirement does not appear to hinder organized religious groups.

A 1992 Presidential decree regulates the exercise of religious freedom. This decree maintains an official preference for the Catholic Church and the Reform Church of Equatorial Guinea, due to their traditional roots and pervasive influence in the social and cultural life of the populace. While the decree does not hinder the practice of other religions, its effects can be observed in many events throughout the country; for example, Roman Catholic Masses serve as a normal part of any major ceremonial function, such as the October 12 National Day. In addition, Catholic and Reform church officials are exempt from airport entry and exit taxes.

The decree regulates the registration of religious groups. To register, churches must submit a written application to the Ministry

of Justice and Worship. The Director General in the Ministry of Justice and Worship oversees compliance with the decree and the registration process. This application was not required of the Catholic and Reform churches.

The application and approval process may take several years, but such delay appears to be the result of bureaucratic inefficiency and not of a policy designed to impede any religious group. Enforcement of registration requirements is inconsistent. Unregistered groups operating in the country can be fined; however, such fines are rarely applied.

The exact number of registered denominations is not publicly available.

Religious study is required in schools and is usually, but not exclusively, Catholic.

Religious leaders indicated that they knew of no steps by the Government to promote an interfaith dialogue between different faiths. However, Protestant churches report a positive dialogue and generally good relations between the various Protestant denominations.

Foreign missionaries work throughout the country, generally without impediment.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

In the past, the Government and President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo's ruling Democratic Party of Equatorial Guinea (PDGE) reacted defensively to any criticism by the clergy. The Government continued unofficially to restrict freedom of expression of the clergy by emphasizing that the role of religion is spiritual, not political. Permission had been granted for a new radio station to operate, but only to broadcast religious programs.

Government agents, including the President, occasionally make official and unofficial visits to observe church behavior or request a timetable of church activities. The Government requires permission for any religious or faith-based social assistance activity outside the confines of places of worship; however, in practice this requirement did not appear to hinder organized religious groups.

While there is no reported workplace discrimination targeted against a particular faith, some non-Catholic pastors who also work for the Government as civil servants maintain a low profile in the workplace with regard to their religious affiliation. Some reported that supervisors informed them of the requirement to participate in religious activities related to their government positions, including attending religious events such as Catholic Masses at government functions.

In April 2004, during legislative and municipal elections, security forces and the former mayor of Malabo, the capital, threatened a missionary pastor who had removed party campaign posters of the ruling party from the walls of his church. The mayor accused the missionary of being a "terrorist" and threatened to put him in jail. He also threatened to turn off the church's electricity and water services. No action was taken against the missionary, due to the intercession of his local colleagues. Ruling party supporters again placed posters on the church walls and neither the missionary nor any church member removed the newly installed posters. The mayor was later replaced, reportedly for a pattern of decisions that did not reflect well on the Government.

The country's fundamental law on religion states that each person is free to study his or her own religion and should not be forced to study another faith. Children of all faiths are allowed to enroll in the Catholic-influenced schools; however, they are expected to participate in daily Catholic religious lessons and prayers. In practice, for non-Catholics access to study in one's own faith generally is not possible. For example, a Protestant church official cited difficulties when enrolling his child at school. He had requested that a teacher of the child's own faith be made available, but the school official claimed there was a lack of funds and stated that he could provide the teacher only if the child's church was willing to pay the teacher's salary.

Catholic missionaries reportedly receive residence permits shortly after their arrival; other persons receive permits after a delay of 2 to 3 months.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who were abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relations among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. However, some non-Catholic religious groups believe that they face societal pressures within their regions. Such concerns may reflect ethnic or individual differences as much as religious differences.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Embassy in Malabo reopened in late 2003. Together with the U.S. Embassy based in Yaounde, Cameroon and the U.S. Consular Agent based in the mainland city of Bata, the Embassy in Malabo maintains contact with religious groups and monitors religious initiatives.

During the period covered by this report, U.S. Embassy representatives met with various church and missionary leaders, as well as with government officials in the Ministry of Justice and Worship.

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